

# NEW FRONTIERS

• PERIODICAL STUDIES IN ECONOMICS AND POLITICS •

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## "SIT-DOWN"

By

JOEL SEIDMAN

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**G. M. STOCKHOLDER  
VISITS FLINT**

By

ROBERT MORSS LOVETT

Volume 5

Number 1  
JANUARY, 1937

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LEAGUE FOR INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY

112 East 19th Street

New York City, N. Y.

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LEAGUE FOR INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY



# NEW FRONTIERS

VOL. V • NO. 1

JANUARY 1937

PUBLISHED MONTHLY FROM SEPTEMBER TO JUNE BY THE  
LEAGUE FOR INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY, 112 EAST 19th ST., NEW YORK CITY

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25 CENTS PER COPY • SUBSCRIPTION \$2.50 PER YEAR



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# A G. M. STOCKHOLDER VISITS FLINT\*

BY ROBERT MORSS LOVETT

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**A**S THE owner of a few shares of the General Motors Corporation I became somewhat alarmed when I learned that the workers were sitting down in my plants at Flint, Fisher Body No. 1 and Fisher Body No. 2, preventing the company from finishing and shipping cars and threatening to interrupt the orderly flow of dividends. Accordingly I took Sunday for a visit of investigation. Arriving at Flint I went to Fisher 2, and on introducing myself as their employer was cordially received by some 400 men occupying the plant. I must admit that I was fortunate in having as my companion Adolf Germer, who is on the board of strategy directing the strike.

My first anxiety was for the condition of my property, and I was relieved to find it well cared for. Springs and cushions were being used for beds, it is true, sometimes laid side by side as in a dormitory, sometimes isolated in cubicles between bales of goods. I was glad to see certain marks of domesticity—a clothes tree, an alarm clock, a whisk broom. The boys had made themselves pretty comfortable. I asked who was responsible for cleanliness, order, and protection of property, and learned that the government was what might be described, except for its unfortunate connotation, as a soviet. Mass assemblies were called at frequent intervals at which everything of importance was discussed. Court was held every morning. I asked what crimes were committed and was told that bringing in liquor and circulating rumors were the usual offenses. Those found guilty of the charges against them were put out.

After a hearty Sunday dinner of roast chicken and ice cream, I was preparing to go over to Fisher 1 when I noticed several round holes in the great glass windows, and inspecting more closely some of the foetus-like bodies of cars on the tracks, awaiting their delayed birth, I saw similar holes in the glass and dents in the metal sides. I thought these indicated wanton violence against my property, and asked how it occurred. Gun fire by the police, was the answer. I knew that there had been fighting on the Monday before in the street outside, but these

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\*This article originally appeared in *The Nation* for January 30, 1937, and is reprinted here through the courtesy of its editors.



disasters were on the second floor. It was obvious that there had been firing from a distance into the plant, endangering the lives of my employees, whom I was beginning to like though they were on strike, and damaging my property. Accordingly I asked for particulars, and as I have seen no clear account of the affair in any newspaper, despite the columns of newsprint that have been given to the strike, I will set down the facts as they were related to me by at least eight participants and eyewitnesses.

The sitdown strike involving 1,500 to 2,000 workers started at Fisher 1, when it appeared that the management was loading dies and special machinery into box cars to be shifted to other cities. Our company is fortunate in having factories scattered over the country; so that by transferring equipment a strike in Flint, Michigan, can be broken by workers in Atlanta, Georgia. Incidentally, that is why the workers demand the industrial form of organization and insist on dealing with General Motors as a whole instead of with the component companies.

The sitdown strike spread to Fisher Body 2, where from 400 to 600 men were involved. Relations were harmonious with the company police, who agreed to let the outer door stand open for food to be brought in. Attempts were made from time to time to shut off heat, light, and water, but workers with a mechanical turn of mind turned them on again.

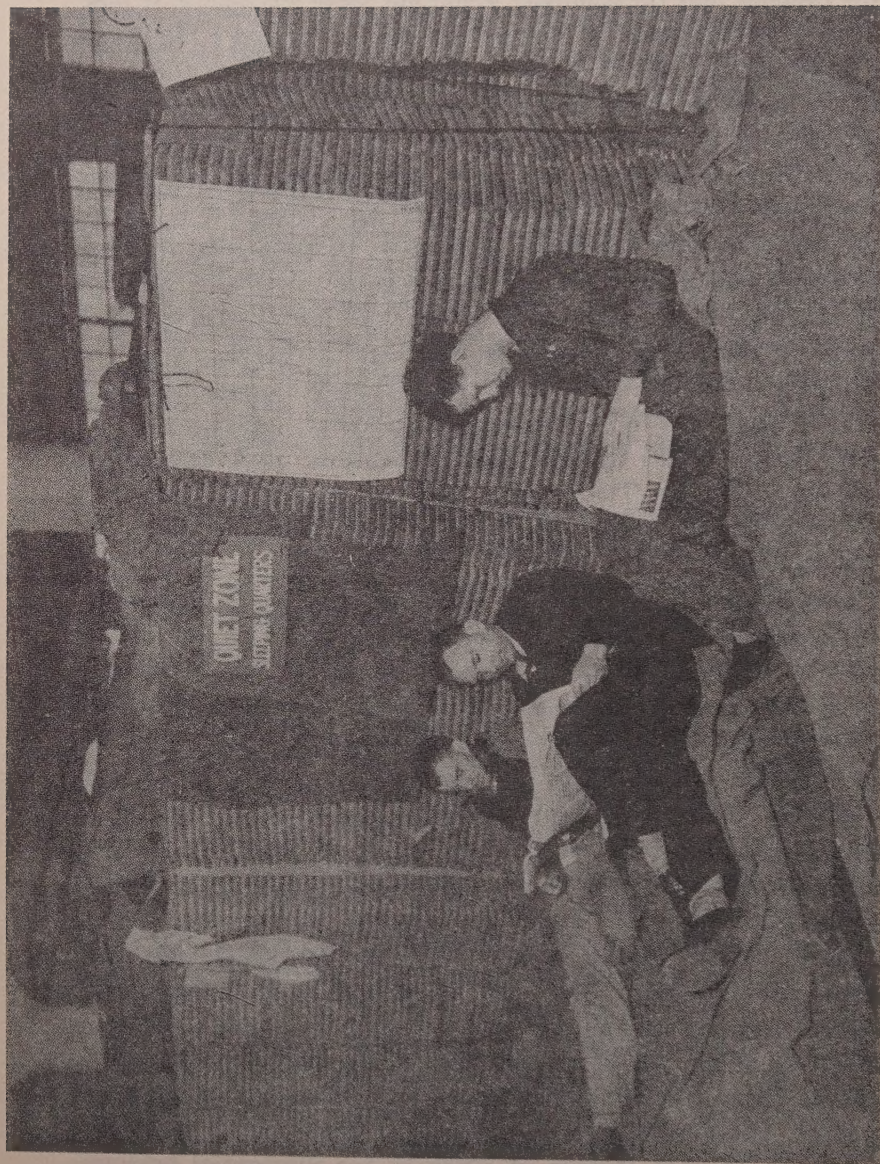
On Monday afternoon the city police under Chief James Wills undertook to block both ends of the street in front of Fisher 2, to prevent food from being brought in. Later the police made an attack in force with tear gas and gun fire, to enter the plant. The strikers from inside countered the tear gas with streams of water, and the bullets with heavy hinges and other missiles. Some twenty-eight persons were injured, fourteen so seriously as to be taken to the hospital, which, I was told, had received warning beforehand to have an emergency ward ready. The defeat of the forces of law and order is referred to as Bulls' Run. The company police of Fisher 2 apparently took no part in the battle, and were found next morning in a ladies' rest room, where they had stood all night at attention, lacking room to sit down. They were released without acrimony by the workers in the factory.

Leaving Fisher 2, I went over to Fisher 1. After the battle, through Governor Murphy's efforts, the strikers and the management of Gen-

eral Motors had been brought to an agreement to go into conference on Monday, January 18, the workers to evacuate the Fisher plants on the promise that the company would not move machinery or dies. They were to march out of Fisher 1 at one-thirty, and a big crowd was collecting outside to see the evacuation. In the long facade of Fisher 1, which stretched away, it seemed, for half a mile into the foggy distance, no doors were open, and I had to go in by a window; but once inside I found the boys were good-natured and, when they realized that I was their employer, flatteringly eager for my autograph. Suddenly a loud-speaker blared forth. It seemed that the General Motors management had agreed to negotiate also with the Flint Alliance, and this was regarded as a breach of faith by the board of strategy of the United Automobile Workers of America, since the question whether the U. A. W. A. should be the sole bargaining agency was one of the points to be negotiated. Accordingly orders were given to hold the plant, the sitdown strike to continue until negotiations were finally complete. The crowd surged back to Fisher 1, where an impromptu outdoor meeting was held to protest against the action of the company.

The agreement of the company officials to admit the Flint Alliance to the discussion was a highly provocative action and was deprecated as such by Governor Murphy. It looked like an attempt of the company to get out of the negotiation into which it had been persuaded. The Flint Alliance is an anti-strike organization mainly of white-collar workers and their families and various beneficiaries of General Motors, directed by George Boysen, ex-mayor of Flint and a former paymaster of the Buick Company. It is in no sense a labor union and is detested by the workers. It represents rather the political forces of Flint, which are aligned with General Motors—mayor, police, courts. On that Sunday in Flint there was meeting the Michigan Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights, at which it was forcibly pointed out to the workers that they had only to use their ballots to turn out the whole nest of unclean birds at the next election—defeat the mayor, move the impeachment of Judge Black for his action in granting a sweeping injunction against the union and in favor of a corporation, General Motors, in which he has substantial holdings, and force the removal of Chief of Police Wills for invoking violence both savage and futile.





Flint Sit-Downers utilize spare time reading magazines and newspapers sent them  
by their families and sympathizers

Wide World Photos



The General Motors strike of 1937 may prove to be historic inasmuch as it has acclimated the sitdown strike in this country as a weapon of industrial conflict. The right of non-working employees to occupy the plant can hardly be classed among civil liberties. It is rather one of the industrial liberties which are on the way to becoming legally recognized. A little over a century ago it was illegal for workers to combine to refuse work for less than a certain sum. Quite recently it was against the law to picket a struck plant. Today picketing is among the civil rights. Already intelligent governors are applying the rule of reason and common sense to situations which law has not reached in its majestic progress. Governor Earle of Pennsylvania has refused to order the state troops to dispossess the bootleg miners, who are taking coal from seams which are their natural source of livelihood, which the legal owners refuse to work. Governor Murphy has refused to use his militia to throw out the sitdown strikers in the General Motors plants, and has ordered the company to cease the effort to cut off heat, light, and water.

The sitdown is the most effective form of strike. It permits the strikers to remain in comfort, even if somewhat bored, instead of tramping about on the picket line in heat, cold, wind, and wet. It obviates the most unpleasant and demoralizing feature of a strike, the use of strike-breakers. It eliminates violence, or at least places responsibility for it squarely on the police. It promotes the morale of the strikers. Above all it is a forcible reminder to workers, to management, to shareholders, and to the public that legal title is not the final answer to the question of *possession*. Who has the better human and natural right to call the Fisher plant his—I, whose connection with General Motors is determined by the price recorded on the New York Stock Exchange, or the worker whose life and livelihood are bound up in the operation of making cars? I bought my shares at long odds and probably have already collected the purchase price in dividends. When I place a winning bet in a horse race I do not claim a share in ownership of the horse. I know from my political economy that my position is the result of labor and sacrifice. Whose? Not mine. Obviously the enormous mass of wealth represented by the capitalization of General Motors, repeatedly enlarged by split-ups and stock dividends, is the surplus resulting from the toil of millions of workers

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over many years. Obviously they have not shared fairly in the wealth they have produced.

Some years ago I gave in the *New Republic* an account of the effort to mobilize the stockholders of the textile mills of New Bedford in support of the strikes against a wage cut. The strikers drew up a powerful plea to the stockholders arguing that the plight of the companies was due largely to the graft and nepotism of managers, who were in effect double-crossing both owners and workers. It would be a less hopeful effort to bring any considerable number of the holders of General Motors stock to intervene in behalf of the workers against the immensely successful management of the company, but nevertheless an appeal from the U.A.W.U. board of strategy to the shareholders, broadcast through the press, would have some effect. We should be informed of the fact that since the settlement arranged by President Roosevelt three years ago there has been constant chiseling by some of our employees to the disadvantage of others. In the Chevrolet plant men are dismissed for wearing badges, for speaking of the union in the lunch hour. At the A. C. spark-plug works girls are entitled to pay increases based on the length of their employment, but they are dismissed when they rise too high in the scale. They may be taken back after a time as beginners.

It is absurd to pretend that either the company or the government under whose auspices the agreements were made has provided any practicable means of rectifying these grievances of the workers. The managers to whom we pay grotesquely huge salaries act the part of ownership, and their behavior is an insult to the intelligence and humanity of those to whom they are legally responsible. They interpose objection to dealing with the U.A.W.U. on the ground that it does not represent all the workers. I should judge that at Flint it was pretty nearly their unanimous choice. In any case it does represent the only effective form of labor organization applicable to a gigantic and far-flung industrial aggregation such as General Motors, and the only practicable method of forcing the elimination of unfair practices under which the workers suffer. As such it deserves the support of the public and especially of that not inconsiderable number who hold the not inconsiderable number who hold the legal responsibility of ownership of the corporation.



# "SIT-DOWN"

By JOEL SEIDMAN



When they tie the can to a union man,<sup>1</sup>

Sit down! Sit down!

When they give him the sack, they'll take him back,

Sit down! Sit down!

## *Chorus*

Sit down, just take a seat,

Sit down, and rest your feet,

Sit down, you've got 'em beat.

Sit down! Sit down!

A NEW strike technique has swept the country, arousing enthusiasm among workers, and bewilderment among employers. In industry after industry, in state after state, the workers remain at their posts but refuse to work. No longer is it possible to introduce strikebreakers, for the workers are in possession. Nor are the workers readily dispersed, for they can barricade themselves in a strong defensive position. If strikebreakers or police storm the factory gate, they are clearly responsible in the eyes of the public for whatever violence may occur. The employer cannot too easily afford to alienate public opinion, nor risk damage to his machinery. And so the workers remain in possession of the plant, in much more comfort and security than on the picket line.

Employers and their allies have been quick to attack sit-down strikes on the ground of illegality. It is precisely because such strikes seem to challenge the rights of property ownership that such controversy has been aroused over them. And yet it should be clear that sit-down strikers are not challenging the ownership of the plant, but merely the employer's right to dismiss them and operate with strikebreakers. That is admittedly legal, for otherwise the right to organize and bargain collectively could not be exercised. Nor should one be

unduly disturbed if conservative judges at first hold sit-down strikes illegal, for virtually every weapon developed by labor has been held illegal in its early stages.

Another charge leveled against the sit-down strike is that it permits a minority to coerce the majority. Unfortunately for its ability to convince, that argument is heard too much from the employers or from organizations sponsored by them, and not frequently enough from workers themselves. It is precisely those who seek absolute industrial power for themselves who are loudest in their defense of the liberty of the non-unionist. The truth of the matter is that a strike can only be maintained and won by the solidarity of the great mass of workers. If they are indifferent or hostile the strike is doomed, whether it be of the sit-down or the walk-out variety. It should be remembered, moreover, that sometimes the strikers delegate a minority of their number to occupy the plant, to lessen the problems of sanitation, feeding, and organization. If those employers who so zealously protect the rights of non-unionists to remain unorganized would instead admit the principle of labor organization and engage in genuine collective bargaining, the number of strikes would be very few indeed.

Nor is the sit-down strike a revolutionary weapon, as some have proclaimed. It asserts, not the right to the factory, but the right to the job. It is scarcely more revolutionary to bar strikebreakers by remaining inside the plant than by maintaining a picket line outside. Nevertheless the sit-down should be regarded as a distinct forward step, for it exhibits a healthy disregard of the property rights held supreme under our present system of law. The sit-down strike should be sharply distinguished from the seizures of Italian factories by workers following the World War, for there is no attempt to operate the plant. The sit-down is a challenge to constituted authority, but so is every picket line. Indeed, if our experience to date is typical, there is likely to be less violence and less destruction of property in a sit-down strike than in a walk-out. The sit-down has been compared by some to the Gandhi passive resistance movement in India. It has also been compared to the tactics of some workers' groups in Europe and the Industrial Workers of the World in the United States, who in certain cases stayed on the job but accomplished as little as possible.

The sit-down strike should be viewed, not as an isolated occurrence,



but in the light of the complex social situation that gives rise to it. Those who wish to avoid it will make most progress, not by attacking the result, but by removing the cause. No worker for slight cause cuts off his income, even temporarily, and it is no comfort to sleep in a factory instead of a home. If workers strike, whether by remaining in or walking out of the factory, it is because they have suffered from grievances to the limit of their endurance, and because they have learned that only by striking will their complaints be adjusted.

The rubber workers of Akron have engaged in more sit-down strikes than have any other group of workers in this country, and probably in the world. Their attitude is well expressed by Sherman H. Dalrymple, president of the United Rubber Workers of America:

Sit-downs do not occur in plants where true collective bargaining exists. Where management does not attempt to destroy unionism by financing company unions, by the formation of vigilante groups, and by placing other obstacles in the path of legitimate union growth, there is such a spirit of cooperation between the union and management that cessations of work do not occur.

Recent sit-downs in Akron have occurred because management either did not enter into fair negotiations on certain grievances or deliberately postponed decisions until resentment of the workers grew so keen that they resorted to sit-downs as a last resort.

The fact that these grievances were settled satisfactorily immediately after the sit-downs definitely indicates that they could have been settled just as easily before if management had negotiated fairly with the union committee in their efforts to secure peaceful settlement of the issues involved.

It is our contention that the only way these sit-downs can be avoided in the future is through the proper application of all the rules of true collective bargaining in a spirit of fair play.<sup>1</sup>

### *Early Uses of the Sit-Down in America*

It is impossible to determine accurately when and where the sit-down strike was first used. It seems such a logical tactic for workers to employ that there are probably many unrecorded instances, each one short in duration, going back almost as far as our modern industrial civilization. The wonder is that its use did not become widespread much earlier.

In at least two American industries it has long been common for workers to stop work without leaving their place of employment. In the anthracite coal fields the breaker boys, whose task it was to remove impurities from the coal, early formed the practice of stopping



Paris Sit-Downers Have a "Song Fest"

MEUTISSA



work without leaving their places when they were dissatisfied. Similarly miners have stopped loading coal when they were not adequately supplied with timber for safety protection.

In the women's garment industry, as far back as 1910, workers have ceased operations without leaving the shop. Partly this has been done when a contract forbade strikes, the workers arguing that a mere stoppage was not a violation. These stoppages, as they were called, attracted little attention because they were usually settled within a few hours, and lacked the drama and publicity value of a picket line. Seldom, if ever, did the workers remain at their places over night, though stoppages often continue for several days. In the Schenectady, N. Y., plant of the General Electric Company, similarly, a sit-down strike occurred as early as 1906. In 1933, 2,500 employees of the Hormel Packing Company in Austin, Minnesota, sat down for three days and won their strike against speed-up, for shorter hours and better wages. Many other instances doubtless occurred in other industries. During the depression the unemployed in New Jersey and elsewhere, took possession of legislative chambers, in an effort to dramatize their plight and force more adequate relief policies.

Seamen used the sit-down strike on the Pacific coast early in 1936. Seamen on the Panama Pacific liner *California* had signed on at the Atlantic coast rates. In an effort to obtain the higher Pacific coast rates, they struck for three days while the ship was at the San Pedro, California docks. The men remained on board, but refused to work. Had they struck while the ship was at sea, they would have been subject to a charge of mutiny. As it was, they narrowly escaped arrest on that charge. The line refused to reemploy the strikers when the ship reached New York, and a long strike against the International Mercantile Marine Company was the result.

### *Sit-Downs Abroad*

In a number of miners' strikes in European countries during the depression, the sit-down technique has been coupled with a hunger strike in order to force concessions from the employer. Workers do not deliberately starve themselves unless low wages have forced them to the point of desperation. The coal miners of Terbovlýé, Jugoslavia, reached that point in the summer of 1934. Whole families had lived

on the equivalent of a dollar a week, and yet another wage cut was announced. Strikes and demonstrations were not allowed, and most unions had been outlawed. Five thousand miners entered the mine on the morning of July 3 and remained there without working or eating. Signs were nailed over the entrance of the shaft: "We, workers in these mines, decline all food until the latest wage reduction is rescinded. We prefer quick to slow starvation. Our families will not be much worse off without us." In the afternoon the company rescinded the reduction order, and the workers emerged triumphant.

Three months later, 1,200 coal miners of Pecs, Hungary, brought the sit-down, or rather stay-in, strike sharply to the attention of the world. The miners had lived for years at the bare subsistence level. For some time they had been working only two days weekly, receiving about \$2 as their weekly income. They decided that quick starvation was better than the slow torture to which they had been subjected, and in October, 1934, they went on a hunger strike within the mine. For more than 100 hours they remained in the mine, without food or water. Five unionists who were sent into the mine by Premier Gomboes to confer with the men were held below as hostages. It was reported that crazed men were chained to posts to prevent suicide. Lajos Molnar, a 72-year old miner, described the suffering of the men in this fashion:

The pangs of hunger maddened us to such an extent that we ate leather belts, and gnawed at shoes. We couldn't even have the mercy of sleep because the corridors of the pits are so narrow that we were forced to stand up on each side of the corridor.

The heroism and determination of the miners won concessions from the company that owned the mine, and on the fifth day the men emerged. Some were brought out on stretchers, and 110 in all were rushed to the hospitals. The men won a bonus of \$3 to each miner who worked through the winter and a Christmas bonus of the same amount. A wage cut was averted. In February, 1937, a second combination sit-down and hunger strike was conducted by the Pecs miners.

In late October, 1934, 60 miners in Katowice, Poland, conducted a hunger strike in a coal mine to prevent the dismissal of the entire force and the abandonment of the mine. As the year ended 370 employees, including a number of women, barricaded themselves in a tobacco factory in Saloniki, Greece, determined not to leave until



their wages were increased. The police surrounded the plant, and refused to allow food to reach the strikers. The water supply was also shut off, as was electrical current. A general strike was declared in Saloniki in sympathy with the besieged strikers. In the following summer 3,000 copper miners, in an effort to force higher wages, took possession of the Rio Tinto mines near Huelva, Spain. After ten days they came to the surface, but the strike continued.

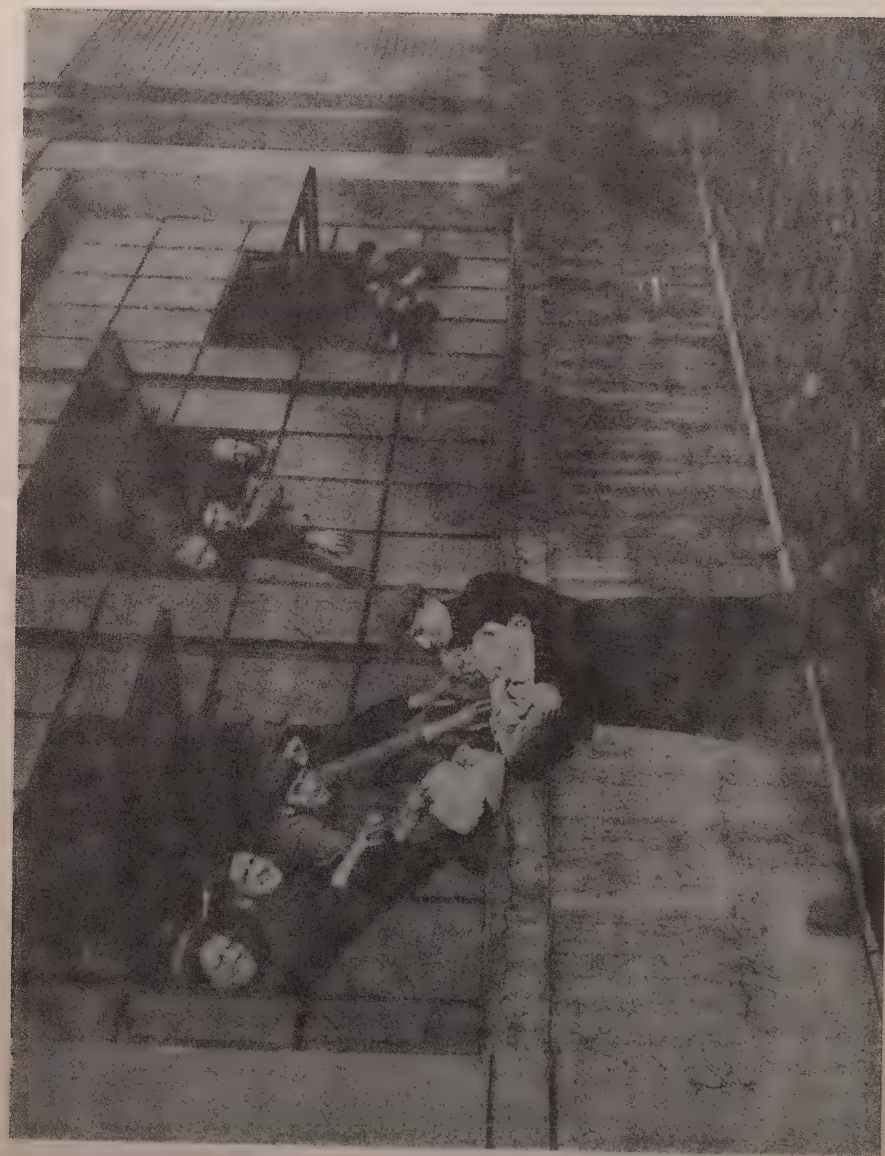
In the fall of 1935 it was 71 Welsh miners at the Nine-Mile Point Colliery in Monmouthshire who conducted a stay-down strike. The miners were not far above the subsistence level, and even their poor standards were threatened by the employment of cheap non-union labor. In protest the men struck. They stayed in the mine slightly more than a week, living on sandwiches and tea sent down by their families and friends. They held daily religious services, and sang and debated to pass the time away. Meanwhile the strike spread, until 20,000 miners had stopped work. At the Taff-Merthyr colliery strikebreakers, with police protection, went into the mine and conquered stay-down strikers after a fierce battle 800 feet below the surface. Forty men were wounded in that struggle. The Nine-Mile Point strikers came up when the Mineworkers' Federation of Great Britain decided to take a strike ballot in all the English, Scotch, and Welsh coal fields.

Elsewhere in Scotland and Wales stay-down strikes of coal miners occurred in 1936. In August, 1936, both Polish and French miners conducted stay-down strikes, the former also going on a hunger strike in an effort to collect back wages due them. The French miners sought the discharge of overseers charged with brutality. Several months earlier rubber workers at Cracow, Poland, had conducted a sit-down strike in the course of which six were killed and twenty wounded.

In far-off India the sit-down made its appearance in June, 1936. Five thousand textile workers at Pondicherry, angered by the non-payment of overtime wages and the failure to raise pay, took possession of the plant. After a week the strike ended with victory for the workers.

### *Rubber Workers Sit Down*

It remained for the Akron rubber workers to popularize the sit-down in the United States. According to Louis Adamic<sup>1</sup> it was first used by ball teams of union rubber workers, who sat down on the



Cleveland Sit-Down Strikers at the Fisher Body Plant get a Supply of Food

*Wide World Photos*



grass or on benches and refused to play until they were provided with an umpire who was a union man. Later a dozen of them remembered this technique when they were dissatisfied with working conditions. The paralysis spread through the plant, and within an hour the dispute was settled.

The sit-down played a part in the circumstances that led up to the big Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company strike of February-March, 1936. Fundamentally it was insecurity, speed-up, the threat of lower wages and longer hours, and the refusal of the company to engage in genuine collective bargaining that caused the strike. The immediate cause was the laying off of 70 men in the tire division, which convinced the workers that the company planned to change from the six-hour to the eight-hour day. In protest against the lay-off 137 men engaged in a sit-down strike, whereupon they were dismissed. Mass meetings were called, and the company under pressure agreed to rehire the 137 and reconsider the suspension of the 70. Nevertheless a strike acquired momentum and mass picketing closed down the entire plant, with 14,000 workers idle. The strike was started spontaneously and was then officially sanctioned by the union.

The rubber workers are new and enthusiastic unionists. The sit-down technique works, and so they use it as soon as an issue arises. Their officers are urging them not to stop production without first bringing their grievance to the attention of the union and the company through the regular channels. During 1936 there was scarcely a week that did not witness at least one sit-down in the rubber plants. In a single plant in less than a year no less than 58 were counted, ranging in length from an hour or less to two or three days. Following one sit-down 31 Goodyear strikers were charged with inciting to riot, but the charges were later dismissed. As the rubber workers become more experienced and more disciplined unionists, the sit-downs over petty issues will doubtless disappear.

### *"A Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong"*

What European miners and American rubber workers had done on a small scale, the French workers did on a mass basis, in one of the most amazing strike waves of history. The strike wave, though largely spontaneous and unorganized, could not have been better timed. Had

it begun earlier than May, 1936, the police would have been sent against it, and large quantities of blood would have been spilled. Had it come later it would have weakened the Popular Front government. It started at the most opportune moment, when Leon Blum and his associates were about to take power. With the workers bringing steady economic pressure on the employers, the Popular Front government was able to enact a remarkable series of labor laws.

The strike wave began in the metal industry in the Paris area. The workers, most of them unorganized, struck because hours were long, wages low, and the cost of living high. Since the pattern of occupying the plants was set by the first group, all others followed. In all directions and to all industries the movement spread. Once the workers had occupied the plants, they turned to the unions for aid and experienced leadership. The unions grew remarkably. The National Federation of Salaried Employees, for example, grew from 18,000 to 220,000. The French Confederation of Labor rose to 5,000,000, doubling its membership. Automobile factories, department stores, munitions plants, shipyards, textile factories—all were occupied. At the peak about 1,000,000 workers were in possession of their plants. The cabinet in adjoining Belgium warned its workers not to follow the French example. The movement spread to Tunis, the French dependency in northern Africa. Even before the great wave of sit-downs began in France, it is interesting to note, the huge Michelin tire plant had been occupied by its workers. The Michelin workers were familiar with the Akron strikes, and were directly influenced by them.

Despite the magnitude of the strike wave, there was practically no violence. The strikers maintained perfect discipline, and took excellent care of the plants. Disregarding the employers' pleas that he evict the strikers with force, Premier Blum insisted that their just grievances be remedied. Since the employers balked at signing contracts with their workers, the Chamber of Deputies rushed through legislation restoring wage cuts, establishing the 40-hour week and the right of labor to bargain collectively, and granting vacations with pay and special tax exemptions. Through this legislation the sit-downers of France have left an impress upon labor relations that will long endure. Later Blum, under pressure from the right, promised that further occupation of factories would not be tolerated. The workers,



however, dissatisfied with the terms offered them, continued to occupy some of the plants.

### *U. A. W. A.; 1937 Model*

The next chapter, one of the most stirring in the history of the sit-down strike, was written in the United States. Automobile workers took the new weapon, adapted and developed it, and with its aid brought the powerful and anti-union General Motors Corporation to terms.

A short sit-down strike had occurred in the automobile industry as early as spring, 1934, in the White plant in Cleveland. This strike was settled within several hours. The first strike in which automobile workers stayed in the plant over night occurred in the Bendix plant in South Bend, Indiana. On November 17, 1936, workers in several Bendix departments, influenced by the successful sit-downs in the Akron rubber industry, stopped work but remained at their machines. The company ordered all workers to assemble outside the plant, to decide whether they wished to work. To forestall this attempted lock-out, the Bendix workers determined to remain in the plant until the management came to terms. In a week victory was won.

The same day the Bendix strike ended, 900 workers in the Midland Steel plant in Detroit sat down. This strike had been planned as a stay-in, to utilize the technique used so effectively in South Bend. This strike marked the first use of the stay-in technique by automobile workers in Michigan. Again the strike ended in a smashing victory for the union. In mid-December the sit-down movement spread to the workers of the Kelsey-Hayes Wheel Company of Detroit. Two short sit-downs ended with the company's promise to negotiate; on its failure to live up to its promise the workers sat down again, this time with the determination not to resume work until they had won their demands. There was also a brief sit-down strike in the Windsor, Ontario, plant of the Kelsey Wheel Company, Ltd., a subsidiary of the Kelsey-Hayes Wheel Company. In the meantime other sit-downs were occurring in Detroit, in the plants of the Aluminum Company of America, Bohn Aluminum, and Gordon Bakery. Thus the stage was set for the big sit-down strike in Flint.

In November and December, 1936, the campaign of the United Automobile Workers of America to organize the General Motors Cor-

poration workers was nearing a climax. The auto workers enjoyed the backing of the progressive unions of the Committee for Industrial Organization. In the warfare between non-union mass production industry and the C.I.O., the General Motors strike was the first major battle. Realizing that much might depend upon the outcome, both sides unstintingly threw their resources into the struggle.



A Night in Paris

*Interpress*

In December the union requested a conference with the heads of the General Motors Corporation, to engage in collective bargaining on behalf of all the corporation's employees. This request was denied, and the union was told to take up grievances with individual plant managers. At this point, in the Fisher Body plant of the corporation in Flint, Michigan, a sit-down that began inauspiciously enough was destined to have far-reaching consequences.

On December 29 the union presented a proposed contract to the plant manager, in Flint, requesting an answer within a week. The next morning a sit-down began in the No. 2 plant, when inspectors were transferred to other jobs because they would not leave the union. Late the same day the men in No. 1 were alarmed to see dies placed on box cars bound for Pontiac and Grand Rapids, where the union is weaker. To protect their jobs they kept the line from starting up again, and remained in possession of the plant. Slowly the tie-up spread through the vast General Motors system, as more and more plants were affected by strikes or the shortage of necessary parts. By early February almost all of the 200,000 General Motors employees were idle, and the weekly production of cars had declined to 1,500 from the mid-December peak of 53,000.

Behind the General Motors strike there was a long record of efforts by the United Automobile Workers of America to bargain collectively, with delays and evasions on the part of the corporation. Especially did the workers rebel against the speeding up of production and the spy system employed by the company. Repeated efforts of the union to win recognition and obtain a union contract came to naught, and in the meantime discrimination against union members continued. Complaints were made to the National Labor Relations Board that General Motors had violated the law by discharging employees for union activity, using industrial spies, and dominating a company union in its St. Louis plant. Scarcely had the hearing gotten under way when the corporation sought an injunction to restrain the board from proceeding further. The injunction was denied in the federal district court, but a subsequent appeal and stay prevented the board from proceeding. Six months later, when the strike began, the hands of the board were still bound.

From the first the corporation officials insisted that they would not negotiate so long as the strikers held the plants. The men suspected a ruse, knowing that if they left the plants they would lose their power to prevent production. They agreed to leave, however, if the company pledged itself not to try to operate the plant or to move machinery while negotiations were in progress. The company refused.



### *Injunctions and Tear Gas in Flint*

On January 2 the struggle entered a new phase. Upon the company's petition, Judge Edward S. Black issued a sweeping injunction restraining the union from continuing to remain in the plant, from picketing, and from interfering in any manner with those who wished to enter the plant to work. To obey the injunction would be to concede the loss of the strike. The injunction exposed the hollowness of the company's complaint against possession of its plant, for a stay-out strike would have been crushed as surely as the sit-down, had the writ been obeyed. Later, in Cleveland, the corporation was to seek an injunction against strikers who had left the plant to form a picket line. Small wonder that when the sheriff read the injunction to the Flint strikers and asked them to leave voluntarily he was laughed out of the plant. Three days later it was discovered that the injunction judge owned stock in General Motors. The union charged that he owned 3,665 shares, worth \$219,900 at the current market quotation, and the judge admitted ownership of 1,000 shares. The union thereupon petitioned the state legislature to impeach Judge Black, for his violation of the statute forbidding a judge from sitting in a case in which he has an interest. The company, sensing its weak position, did not apply for the writs of body attachment which would have required the sheriff to attempt to arrest the sit-down strikers for contempt of court.

Suddenly, on January 11, the company changed its tactics. Heat in the plant was shut off, and city police mobilized in the area. Company police attempted to starve out the sit-downers, attacking carriers of food and removing the ladders by means of which food had been brought in. The sit-downers, in return, captured the gates from the company police. The city police, who had cleared nearby streets in advance, then attacked in an effort to recapture the gates. Tear gas bombs were hurled against the sit-downers and their sympathizers outside. Strikers used the fire hoses within the plant to direct streams of water on the police and on the gas bombs. During the battle the sit-downers, who had until then occupied only the second floor of the plant, took possession of the entire building. For four hours the strikers fought the police, who used clubs, tear gas, and riot guns. Fourteen workers were wounded by the police gunfire, one of them seriously, and dozens were tear-gassed. Within the sound truck union organizers

took turns at the microphone, shouting encouragement to the strikers, and giving direction to the battle. When the battle ended the strikers remained in victorious possession of the plants.

The county prosecuting attorney, who owned 61 shares of General Motors stock, jailed the wounded as they were released from the hospital, and obtained 1,200 John Doe warrants under which any strike sympathizer could be arrested. Seven of the Flint strike leaders were arrested, charged with unlawful assembly and malicious destruction of property. The union demand for the arrest of the police, company guards, and others who had been responsible for the attack was disregarded. In the meantime National Guardsmen were mobilized and sent to Flint.

At this point, the public was relieved to learn that a truce had been arranged. General Motors agreed to enter into negotiations with the union in an effort to settle the strike, and the union in return agreed to evacuate all plants held by it, whether in Flint or elsewhere. One of the most important matters to be considered in the negotiations was whether the United Automobile Workers should be recognized as the sole bargaining agency for the workers. Thirty minutes before the sit-downers were to march out of the Flint plants, and after other plants had already been evacuated, the union discovered that W. S. Knudsen, executive vice-president of the corporation, had agreed to bargain collectively with the Flint Alliance, a semi-company union, semi-vigilante strikebreaking organization inspired by the company. Regarding this as a violation of the truce, the union refused to evacuate the plants, and General Motors thereupon cancelled the scheduled conference. Several days later the corporation announced that 110,000 workers had signed petitions asking to be returned to work, but this number was exaggerated and the union showed that large numbers of the signatures had been obtained by intimidation.

On February 1 came the turning point in the strike. General Motors had taken the offensive, and the union had suffered defeats in Anderson, Indiana, and Saginaw, Michigan. Hearings on another application for an injunction were in progress, this time before Judge Gadda. The Flint Alliance was becoming dangerous, and there was some fear that the back-to-work movement inspired by the company might spread. Something had to be done to bolster morale. The union had again to take the offensive.



The Chevrolet plant in Flint, the scene of discrimination against union members provided the opportunity. Of most strategic importance was plant No. 4, in which all Chevrolet motors are assembled. A hundred feet from this plant, however, was the personnel building, headquarters of company police and hired gunmen. The strategy decided upon was to make a sham attack upon plant No. 9, in the far corner of the tract. At 3:30 p. m. a sit-down started there, and the excitement brought the company police on the run. At 3:35 the union men in plant No. 6, starting to No. 9 to help, were instead directed by union leaders in the sound truck into No. 4, where a sit-down simultaneously began. The Company police arrived too late, and the union was in control of the key plant, without which no production was possible. The Women's Emergency Brigade, made up of wives, mothers and sisters of the strikers, played a heroic and important part in the battle, both at No. 9 and No. 4. They smashed windows of the plant to keep the men from being suffocated by tear gas, and with locked arms barred the police attack upon the main gate of No. 4.

On the following day Judge Gadola issued the injunction requested by the company. Though not a stockholder, as Judge Black had been, he proved himself just as willing a servant. His injunction, similar in many ways to that issued by Judge Black a month before, was much more drastic. It ordered the union officers and the sit-downers, under penalty of \$15,000,000 to evacuate the plants by 3 p.m. the following day, and to refrain from picketing and from interfering with the operation of the plants or the entry of strikebreakers. The sheriff was ordered to evacuate the plants within 24 hours. Again the strikers refused to budge, and the judge ordered them all arrested. Sheriff Wolcott, explaining that he lacked a sufficient number of deputies, refused to carry out the order unless Governor Murphy provided the aid of the National Guard.

Meanwhile sit-downers within Fisher Body plant No. 2 and Chevrolet No. 4 were in a virtual state of siege. National Guardsmen surrounded the plants, and refused to allow friends and relatives to speak to the men at the factory gates. A hunger siege at first imposed by the Guardsmen was lifted in less than a day. Reporters who tried to speak to the strikers at the gates were escorted out of the military zone at the point of bayonets. At Fisher No. 1, on the contrary, the strikers

were able to receive visitors and come and go as they pleased, under no restrictions except those imposed by their own shop council.

The stumbling block to peaceful settlement of the strike remained the issue of recognition. The union, which first asked recognition as sole bargaining agent for all General Motors employees, later surrendered that claim and asked merely to be sole bargaining agent in 20 plants closed by the strike. The union proposed that, if this was agreed upon, all plants immediately resume operations, and all other points at issue be settled in conference. This the company likewise refused. Company spokesmen favored a plebiscite to determine the wishes of the men, but refused to recognize the union as sole bargaining agent in those plants where it might win a majority.

Finally, on February 11, an agreement was reached and the strike ended. Much of the credit for its settlement without further bloodshed belonged to Governor Murphy, who proved a skillful and patient mediator. Under the agreement the United Automobile Workers was recognized as bargaining agent for its members, and the company agreed not to bargain on matters of general corporate policy with any other group from 20 struck plants without the governor's sanction. There was to be no discrimination against union men, and all court proceedings were to be dropped. Collective bargaining negotiations were to begin on February 16. The union, on its part, was to evacuate the occupied plants, refrain from recruiting on company property, and exhaust every possibility of negotiating before calling any other strike. At the same time the company announced an increase in the average wage rate of five cents an hour, swelling its normal annual wage bill by \$25,000,000.

The strikers hailed the settlement as a signal victory for them. For the first time the giant General Motors Corporation had been fought to a stand-still by its workers, and forced to engage in collective bargaining with them. After 44 days the sit-downers marched out of the plant, heads and spirits high, singing "Solidarity Forever." Out they came, two by two, with a large American flag at the head of the procession, to the cheers of 2,000 sympathizers assembled at the plants.

### *Other Sit-Downs*

Akron, Detroit, and Flint were not the only cities to witness the sit-down strike in the United States. Late in 1936 and early in

1937, as its popularity increased, it was employed by many other groups of workers. Automobile workers in many cities, notably Toledo, South Bend, and Kansas City, have used the sit-down technique. Glass workers in Illinois, W.P.A. workers in New York City and Chicago, bakers in Detroit, rubber workers in Illinois and Maryland, building service workers in New York City, and motion picture extras in California have used the same method. Other companies to experience sit-down tactics on the part of their workers include the Aluminum Company of America in its Detroit plant, the American Casting Company of Birmingham, the Briggs Manufacturing Company of Detroit, the United Wall Paper Company of Joliet, and the Wahl-Eversharp Pen Company of Chicago. Even a daily paper, the Detroit News, has experienced a sit-down strike, in this case, of its printing pressmen. A chain of retail tire shops in Chicago has also witnessed a sit-down. Submarine builders, aircraft workers, and motion picture operators are others to use the sit-down technique. Salesgirls employed by F. W. Woolworth sat down in Detroit. There are other instances too numerous to mention.

Even hospital workers have used the sit-down strike. Early in February, 1937, maintenance and service employees in a Brooklyn hospital engaged in a sit-down, demanding \$15 a month for the cost of living outside. They continued to serve and feed the patients, but refused to serve doctors and nurses. Fifteen workers in the hospital laundry barricaded themselves within it to prevent its further use. After two days a compromise settlement was reached.

What are the causes of sit-down strikes? The same grievances that cause other strikes. Wages, hours, working conditions, discrimination, speed-up, lay-offs, espionage—all of these have played a part. Some unusual grievances have likewise caused sit-down protests. Akron rubber workers sat down when their union president, Sherman H. Dalrymple, was beaten in Gadsden, Alabama, by thugs employed by the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company. The Bendix employees in South Bend were aroused by favoritism to company union members and anti-union propaganda by company union leaders. Goodrich workers in Akron have sat down to force the removal of non-union workers. Hollywood extras sat down because casting directors were hiring society girls at low wages. Employees of the Brownhill-Kramer



Hosiery Company of Philadelphia sat down to prevent removal of the machinery and moving of the business to non-union territory. Every type of grievance has produced its quota of sit-downs.

### *The Sit-Down As a Union Tactic*

The sit-down strike has gained such popularity in a short time, not only because it is novel, but also because it possesses distinct advantages over the walk-out strike from the point of view of effective tactics. If a strike is to be won it is essential that the plant not be operated. Even if production is low or non-existent, the appearance of operation has a disturbing effect upon the strikers' morale. How can workers make more certain that the plant will not operate than by remaining in physical possession?

In a walk-out strike a picket line is maintained to keep strikebreakers out of the plant. Often they succeed in entering, especially where police furnish assistance or the employer hires strong-arm men from a strikebreaking agency. Strikebreakers cannot enter a plant held by sit-downers, however, until the strikers are ejected. That is no easy matter for they occupy a strong defensive position behind the factory walls. Out on the streets the police, with their armament and discipline, have obvious advantages. Mounted police may scatter a picket line in a single charge. Even tear gas may be ineffective against sit-downers, as the Fansteel Metallurgical Corporation workers proved. When deputies hurled tear gas bombs into their North Chicago plant, the strikers turned on the ventilating apparatus, and the spread of the gas was checked. It was the deputies themselves who were most affected by the gas.

If violence occurs in an attack on sit-downers, it is obviously the employer and his police allies who are directly responsible for it. Such attacks will affect public opinion, and may hurt the employer's standing with the buying public. It is of no value to the employer to eject the strikers if by so doing he loses public sympathy. If a fight occurs on the picket lines, on the other hand, it is easy for the employer to charge that attacks by pickets on strikebreakers were the cause. A bitter struggle within the plant, moreover, may result in damage to valuable machinery.

Morale is more easily maintained in a sit-down strike. The strikers acquire greater confidence in their own strength, and are more effec-

tively welded into a militant and determined force. Outside influences that might have a weakening effect upon morale are excluded. An injunction may instill fear or doubt in pickets, and so weaken their picket line; but sit-downers, in injunction or no injunction, still remain in physical possession of the plant. Nor need the workers fear that the machinery will be moved, and the work performed elsewhere. Besides, it is far more pleasant to be in the plant than tramping the streets, exposed to rain, snow, sleet, wind, and extremities of temperature. Time need not drag too heavily, for there is much work to be done, and sit-downers have been resourceful in obtaining or inventing means of recreation. Even boredom in comparative comfort and security is to be preferred to picketing in rain or slush, in constant danger of attack.

The sit-down strike may be employed in any industry, but its greatest effectiveness is in mass production plants with minute division of labor and a conveyor or moving belt system of production. So highly are such plants integrated that a break anywhere in the chain of production stops the entire plant. Other industries, as diversified as shipping and department stores, have witnessed its successful use. That sit-downers may have an important influence on legislation as well as on agreements with the employer is demonstrated by the French experience.

Not all plants are so situated as to permit a successful sit-down strike. Certain big steel mills, for example, are built on large tracts of company property, entirely surrounded by steel fences. The buildings may be located as far as a mile and a half from the gates. The sit-down is most apt to be successful in a plant with windows opening on a street. It is then possible for the strikers to receive food and messages from their friends outside, even though company or city police win control of the outside door or gates. In Flint, when the National Guard surrounded the plant and for a time barred the entry of food, the union threatened to drop provisions to the besieged men from a plane. If the plant is situated some distance from the street, the sit-downers may find themselves besieged, without means of communicating with the outside world or obtaining food. For this reason, among others, a sit-down strike is best reinforced with a strong picket line around the plant. Difficulties of feeding or sleeping or the lack of sanitary facilities, moreover, may make it inadvisable to keep all the strikers within the plant. Sometimes outside picketing cannot prevent

the entry of strikebreakers, because a railroad runs directly into the company's plant. This was true in the case of the Electric Storage Battery Company of Philadelphia. In such cases the sit-down is the only effective form of strike, and the Electric Storage Battery workers were among the early users of that method.

The sit-down may be spontaneous or planned. If planned in advance, the exact time must be kept a secret until the moment of action, for otherwise the employer will learn of it, the plant will be shut, and the workers not allowed in. Many sit-downs have started directly after lunch. The workers may have suffered some grievance in the morning, and have had their first opportunity to consult with each other during the lunch period. Short, spontaneous sit-down strikes, to which the name of "quickies" has been attached, are especially important in fighting speed-up and building an organization.

Sit-down strikers merely wish to make certain that the plant will not operate during the strike, or that machinery will not be moved. Had General Motors promised this in Flint, the plants would have been evacuated at once. The refusal of the company to make the promise convinced the workers that plans for operation or removal had been made. In the Bendix strike in South Bend, the strikers evacuated on the company's agreement to negotiate, and within two days an agreement was reached.

In some instances the sit-down method may lead to abuse, with a handful of workers stopping a huge plant because of a petty grievance. This is not likely to happen where proper machinery for settling grievances is set up, and so operated that the workers acquire confidence in it. A few workers can stop production only where large numbers are ready to support them. Union members soon learn to act as disciplined unionists, utilizing machinery for the peaceful settlement of disputes, and resorting to strikes of any variety only after other methods have proven fruitless.

Employers are beginning to turn their attention to building up defenses against the sit-down technique. According to one newspaper reporter who was in Flint during the General Motors strike, it has been proposed that manufacturing plants be built like fortresses or penitentiaries, with walls, pill-boxes, guardhouses, sentries, and impregnable gates. Remote control of power, light, and water would be installed, so that the section of the plant seized could be deprived of these



facilities. Entrances and exits would be controlled so that food supplies could be cut off and the sit-down strikers starved out.<sup>4</sup> After the General Motors sit-down began, it is interesting to note, Ford built a double fence around his River Rouge plant, with heavy steel drop gates on the main driveways. All street car and automobile approaches to this plant are on company land, and it comes as near to being a fortress as almost any other industrial establishment in America.

Thus far the sit-down has been used, for the most part, by the unions affiliated with the Committee for Industrial Organization. The executive council of the American Federation of Labor in February, 1937, ordered an investigation of the new technique. Until the study has been completed, the Federation will withhold comment on the legality or desirability of the sit-down.

### *Keeping Comfortable*

Sit-downers have had a host of new problems to solve, not the least of which have been living in factory buildings. Food, sleeping quarters, and sanitation are matters that must be properly attended to if morale is to be kept up and health maintained for long. The necessary work must be done, and facilities for recreation provided. In all of these respects our experience with sit-downs, brief though it has been, is illuminating.

With hundreds or perhaps several thousands of sit-downers in a plant, the problem of food becomes urgent. The union must assume responsibility for seeing that the workers receive three meals a day. This is a severe strain on the union treasury, but thus far adequate meals have been furnished. Indeed, in some strikes most of the sit-downers have gained weight. One of the most important committees in many sit-down strikes is the chiseling committee, which seeks donations from food merchants. It calls for resourcefulness when the committee is unable to obtain the food for the menu as planned, and the cook must prepare whatever is brought back. The Midland Steel Products Company sit-downers in Detroit were aided by a daily donation of 30 gallons of milk by the milk drivers' union. Often the meals furnished by the union are supplemented by food brought to individual strikers by their families or friends.

Usually the food is cooked in a nearby hall or restaurant, and brought in milk cans, kettles, or other large containers to the plant. In the case of the Wahl-Eversharp Pen Company of Chicago, police refused to allow friends of the strikers to bring food into the plant. The sit-downers then lowered a rope from an upper window to the roof of an adjoining bakery, and obtained food in this fashion. The menu of sit-downers is usually simple, but adequate. Barrels, kegs, and whatever else is suitable are used for chairs, and tables are likewise improvised. Newspapers sometimes serve as tablecloths. Liquor is strictly forbidden.

Usually the cooking is done by a committee of the strikers' wives. In large strikes, however, a professional cook may be obtained. The cook in the Flint strike, for example, was sent there to help by the Cooks' Union of Detroit. He had previously cooked for four other sit-down strikes. For the Flint strike the union installed new kitchen equipment worth more than \$1,000.

"The food goes into the factories in twenty kettles of various sizes," the cook reported. "The amount of food the strikers use is immense. Five hundred pounds of meat, one thousand pounds of potatoes, three hundred loaves of bread, one hundred pounds of coffee, two hundred pounds of sugar, thirty gallons of fresh milk, four cases of evaporated milk!"<sup>8</sup>

In Detroit a cooperative kitchen was established to feed 800 sit-down strikers in the Bohn Aluminum, Cadillac, and Fleetwood plants:

The kitchen runs on efficient lines, not speed-up, in two shifts. About 50 men and women comprise the working crew; the first shift working from 7:00 until 2:00 in the afternoon, the second from 11:00 in the morning until 6:00 in the afternoon. Everyone attends the meeting held at 2:00 o'clock daily at I.A.S. Hall where the various committees make their reports. There is the kitchen committee, which takes care of preparing the food, with a chef from the Cooks' Union, Local No. 234, to supervise the preparation of it. Then there is a finance committee, with two treasurers, working in shifts, one from the Cadillac plant and one from the Bohn Aluminum plant.<sup>9</sup>

Other important committees were the drivers' committee, which delivered the food, and the chiseling committee, which covered the city for donations of food or money. About two-thirds of the supplies were obtained in this fashion.

One of the important problems is to obtain comfortable sleeping quarters. Sit-down strikers in an automobile body or final assembly

plant are fortunate in this regard, for they may sleep on the floor of the cars, removing the seats if necessary or arranging the seats between the conveyor lines. In the Midland steel plant some of the men tied burlap to machines, and so rigged up cots. Elsewhere tables have been made to serve. Sometimes cots have been brought to the plants by friends, and usually all have obtained blankets after the first night. Standard Cotton Products Company sit-downers in Flint built houses of cardboard packing boxes, and made beds of cotton padding designed for automobile seats. Their houses were in two rows, one labeled "Union Street" and the other "Cotton Street."

Most visitors to sit-down strikes have been impressed by the neatness of the men and the tidy appearance of the plants. One of the important jobs is to see that the factories are kept clean. The machinery is kept in good order, for the sit-downers wish to return to work as soon as possible after the strike ends. Often a former barber is found among the strikers, and he is made to resume his old trade. In the Kelsey-Hayes plant a wheelbarrow on a platform served as a barber chair. In one sit-down strike where there were women employees, a beauty parlor was opened for them by a former worker in such an establishment. Washing is often a problem, however, for in most plants only ordinary washbowls are available. One sit-down, in the Detroit plant of the Aluminum Company of America, had to be transformed into a walk-out because a number of the men became ill and lack of sufficient sanitary facilities made further stay in the plant hazardous to health.

### *Obeying the Rules*

A certain amount of work is required, for meals must be served, the place kept clean, a watch kept, and discipline maintained. For recreation the men play cards, listen to the radio, or provide their own entertainment program. There are dancers, singers, and musicians in every large group, and often an orchestra can be formed. Frequently the sit-downers write songs about their own strikes. A bowling alley was set up in one plant, and horse shoes pitched in others. Basket-ball courts have been improvised, hockey games played, and boxing and wrestling matches promoted. Where the company has provided a recreation room, with ping-pong tables and other games, these facilities are used to the utmost.



Those who are studiously inclined may prefer to read. The educational director of the United Automobile Workers has organized regular classes for the sit-downers, with parliamentary procedure, public speaking, and trade unionism among the popular subjects. Even where no formal classes are organized the sit-down has considerable educational value, for the workers must set up their own community government, and solve the many problems that arise. In some cases church services have been held regularly. Loud speaker systems are rigged up, so that announcements made at the gate or in the nearby union office may be heard by all. Pep speeches are made in the same manner, and entertainment is similarly broadcast. Often the sit-downers amuse themselves, at the very start of the strike, by hanging up the "No Help Wanted" sign.

Where both men and women are employed, the sit-downers must be extremely careful to avoid the charge of immorality. Usually the women have been sent home, partly for this reason and partly because the hardships were more difficult for them. Often the married women had to leave in any event, because of their family responsibilities. Where women have stayed in the plant, strict chaperonage rules have been established. In the Kelsey-Hayes strike the girls were not permitted to leave their dormitory after 11 p. m. The sit-downers asked that two of the regular plant matrons be placed in charge of the women's dormitory, and this request was complied with. The girls in this strike were not permitted to go through a dark tunnel that connected two buildings. Sit-down strikers of the Brownhill-Kramer Hosiery Company of Philadelphia included both men and women. The latter entered the factory each morning at 8 and stayed until 6 p.m., and only the men remained in the plant all night. Most sit-downers have not permitted women to enter the buildings at all. In several cases, however, the overwhelming majority of the sit-down strikers have been women. This was true, for example, in the cigar plant of Webster-Eisenlohr, Inc., of Detroit. "This is a woman's sit-down," said one of the strikers. "The men are just around—that's all."

Discipline and morale are of vital importance. Those who do not conform to the rules may be sentenced to extra clean-up duty for minor offenses, and ejected for serious violations. In the General Motors strike in Flint, court was held each morning, with bringing in liquor

and circulating rumors the most frequent offenses. Elsewhere it may be overstaying leaves that is most frequently punished. In the Standard Cotton Products Company strike in Flint the judge himself was twice convicted of breaking the rules, and had to do extra dish washing as the penalty. Sometimes foremen and other company officials are allowed to converse only with union officers, for fear that they may adversely affect the strikers' morale. In some instances subterfuges have been employed by strikers or their wives in order to get out of the plant. Serious illness has been reported at home, or a birth in the family. Where too many such cases seemed to be reported a check was made, and the member immediately dropped. In some cases foremen have visited wives of sit-downers, making false reports of illness or hardships within the plant, in order to break down morale.

Except when trouble is feared, sit-downers are usually permitted to leave the plant for short intervals, under rules that they decide upon. In most cases they are required to return by a specified hour, and a check is made as they go and come. If an outside picket line is maintained as well, the strikers take turns staying within the plant. In one case a sit-downer who belonged to the National Guard was released for strike duty with the Guard.

Visitors are admitted only after a careful check of their credentials. Usually a pass signed by a responsible union officer is required. In many plants everyone who enters must submit to a search for weapons, and a similar search is made of all who leave. A communications system calls to the gate those who have visitors. A post office is sometimes set up to handle the mail, which may be censored. Gates and doors are often barricaded against a surprise attack, with guards on duty at all times. In Flint, sentries, in six-hour watches were on duty twenty-four hours a day, with an alarm system to warn quickly of impending danger. Sometimes metal strips are welded across doorways and windows, to make police entry more difficult, and to provide protection from gas bombs and bullets. In some plants pickets assigned to make the rounds have had to punch the time clock as they went on or off duty.

Heat, light, and water are important to the health and comfort of the strikers. Usually the companies have permitted these services to be maintained. The cutting off of these facilities has precipitated some

of the most bitter battles yet fought by sit-downers. In some instances the employer has alternately turned the heat off and on.

Race relations may be another problem faced by sit-downers. In the Midland plant in Detroit both whites and negroes were employed. Workers of both races occupied the plant, and worked together in harmony throughout the strike.

In Flint an amusing episode occurred while the sit-downers were in possession of the plants. Chevrolet plant No. 4 had just been seized and considerable disorder had occurred. Following the seizure everything was peaceful, and the many camera men on the scene had little to do. They therefore engaged in a baseball game, with the still camera men playing the movie camera operators. The umpires were several hundred sit-downers on the roof of plant No. 4, and the spectators were the National Guardsmen on duty. One team, displeased with a decision, sat down on the ball field, and promptly won a reversal, amid cheers, from the union umpires. Several innings later the other team was similarly dissatisfied. Its tactics were to sing "Solidarity Forever;" and the umpires, after joining in the song, again reversed the decision.

Marching out of a plant when the strike has been won or a truce arranged offers opportunity for a colorful demonstration, as in Flint. The Bendix strikers marched out in military order, headed by their own drum and bugle corps, and paraded to the union hall. After the settlement proposals had been adopted, the strikers paraded through the business section of South Bend, headed by the effigy of the Bendix company union hanging on a long pole.

### *A Typical Set of Rules*

Sit-downers must govern their community, and solve each problem as it arises. Fundamentally these problems are similar, though new situations will arise in each plant. The rules adopted by the sit-down strikers in the Standard Cotton Products Company in Flint, Michigan, may be taken as fairly typical. With fewer than a hundred strikers, they were able to transact business in a full meeting held at 10 o'clock each morning, without the more complex and elaborate organization that a large plant would require. A strike committee of five members was placed in charge. Other officers included a chairman, a sec-



retary, a judge, a press agent, and three clerks. There was a patrol committee of two, a food committee of two, a clean-up committee of three, and an entertainment committee of one.

Posted on the wall of the mess hall were the following rules, which were added to from time to time by majority vote:

## RULES AND REGULATIONS

Rule No. 1. Any man who disturbs anyone while sleeping without good reason will have to wash the dishes and mop floor for one day.

Rule No. 2. Any man found drinking or looking for arguments will wash dishes and mop floor for one day—1st offense.

Rule No. 3. Every man who leaves must get a pass from the committee and check with the clerk. Passes must be shown to the doorman when going in and out, and on returning must check with the clerk. The doorman must obey these rules very strictly.

Rule No. 4. Doormen answer the phone and if the call is important he calls a committee man. No long-distance calls shall be made. All local calls are allowed. No profane language used over phone.

Rule No. 5. When photographers or outsiders come in no one speaks to them but a committee man.

Rule No. 6. Everyone must line up single file before meals are served. Dishwashers will be appointed before each meal by the clean-up committee. Every man must serve his turn.

Rule No. 7. Anyone eating between meals must wash his own dishes.

Rule No. 8. Every man must attend meetings.

Rule No. 9. No standing on tables.

Rule No. 10. No passes will be issued after 12:00 P.M.—except emergency calls.

Rule No. 11. Judge's decision on all broken rules will be regarded as final.

Rule No. 12. No conversation about the strike to the management. Any information concerning the strike will be furnished by the committee.

Rule No. 13. No more than a two-hour grace period allowed on passes. No grace period on a 20-minute leave.

Rule No. 14. No women allowed in the plant at any time.

Rule No. 15. No passes issued during meals and not until the dishes are done unless it is business.

Rule No. 16. All committees must attend meetings and report their activities.

Rule No. 17. No card playing or walking around or any disturbance during meetings.

### *What of the Law?*

Unquestionably most judges will hold the sit-down strike illegal, under the law of trespass. The fact that the law of trespass was developed in a different social situation will be of no avail. Yet labor need not be unduly disturbed, for most weapons used by it were first held illegal. That was true both of the strike and the boycott. Indeed strikes for certain purposes are still held illegal in many states, and the secondary boycott is also outlawed. Picketing is prohibited in many injunctions, including those issued by Judges Black and Gadola in Flint. The continued use of a logical weapon, backed by enough economic and political pressure, eventually results in its being held legal. If lobbying by labor does not force old-party legislators to declare the sit-down legal, the foundation of an independent party of labor will accomplish that end. Workers should concentrate on defeating the employer, and not be too much concerned about a law that is framed largely in the interests of employers and owners.

Attacks upon the sit-down strike have already begun, and many more may be expected. Governor Hoffman of New Jersey, for example, has warned that the entire resources of the state, if necessary, would be used to eject sit-downers. In his view, workers have no more right to take possession of a factory than gangsters have to take possession of a bank. Early in 1937, legislation to outlaw the sit-down strike was being considered in Alabama and Vermont. New York City police at first refused to intervene against sit-downers. In February, 1937, however, more stringent rules were put in force, under which strikers will be ejected and arrested if a formal complaint is made by the owner of a plant. In the absence of such complaint the police will not interfere, so long as the strikers are orderly. Much more liberal is the attitude of Secretary of Labor Perkins, who has expressed doubt as to whether sit-downers violate any law.

Wyndham Mortimer, vice-president of the United Automobile Workers, has thus stated the case for the sit-down strike:

Is it wrong for a worker to stay at his job? The laws of the state and nation recognize, in a hundred ways, that the worker has a definite claim upon his job; more fundamentally, it is recognized that every workman has a moral right to continue on his job unless some definite misconduct justifies his discharge. These sit-down strikers are staying at their work-places; no one has a better right to be there than have these men themselves. No one else, certainly, has any right to those positions. But the sit-down strikers have performed valuable



services in those factories; General Motors and the public alike have profited by those services. To call them trespassers now, and to deny their right as human beings to remain with their jobs, is logically unsound and is manifestly unjust.<sup>7</sup>

The union asserts that the workers have a property right in their jobs which is superior to the company's right to the use of the property. This theory will be rejected by most judges today, but in time it may be accepted as good law. The legal concept of property rights has changed and developed with usage. In Flint the union also argued that General Motors was not entitled to an injunction on the ground that it had itself violated the laws relating to collective bargaining, and therefore did not come into court with clean hands. Judge Gadola rejected this theory, though other judges have applied this general principle of equity to labor injunction cases.<sup>8</sup> Gadola did not justify General Motors' actions, but merely asked whether one wrong could be righted by another wrong. This attitude is contrary to the principles of equity.

The sit-down strike has served notice on society that mere ownership does not carry with it all possible rights with reference to a factory. Those who work in it, who make it produce with their labor and who depend upon it for their livelihood, should likewise have a voice in its control. Those who invest their lives in an industry have at least as much at stake as those who merely invest their money. The sit-down strike, brings these facts forcibly to public attention. It is interesting to note that, in the sit-down strike, workers are re-establishing the control over the tools of production that they lost with the Industrial Revolution.

The ethical case for the sit-down strike has well been presented by Rabbi Edward L. Israel, former chairman of the Social Justice Commission of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The problem involved, Rabbi Israel asserts, is one of the comparative emphasis of human rights over against property rights. The entire struggle of the human race from bondage toward freedom, he points out, has been a constant battling against vested interests.

The ethical issue in the sit-down strike concerns itself with the right of an employee to his job. According to the average standard of wages in industry today, practically every working family is only a few days removed from starvation. We must therefore ask ourselves whether the right of hiring and firing, at a time when jobs are at a premium, can possibly be construed to be surrounded by such absolutistic and unassailable property prerogatives that it



can literally place within the hands of an employer the power of life and death over the men who work for him.

No social conscience will grant any man such a right. By the same token, the worker has certain rights in his job. If he feels that collective bargaining through a national labor union is necessary for the preservation of those rights, he is definitely entitled to pursue such orderly methods as may force the employer to meet with his representatives in collective bargaining.<sup>9</sup>

The argument that a worker has a property right in his job has thus been stated by Homer Martin, president of the automobile workers union:

What more sacred property right is there in the world than the right of a man in his job? This property right involves the right to support his family, feed his children and keep starvation away from the door. This property right is the very foundation stone of American homes. It is the most sacred, most fundamental property right in America. It means more to the stabilization of American life, morally, socially and economically, than any other property right.

Sit-down strikes, like other types of strikes, occur when long-standing grievances of workers have brought them to the breaking point. Those employers who recognize unions and deal with them fairly need have little fear of sit-downs. If all employers recognized the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively, and obtain a fair share of the fruits of industry, few strikes would occur. If, when a strike occurred, the employer made no effort to operate with strike-breakers, there would be no need for a seizure of the plant. Employers will make more progress by removing the just grievances of workers than by attacking them on the basis of property laws framed in an earlier social situation, and designed for other purposes.

The sit-down strike is here to stay. Of that workers are resolved. The law may change slowly, but change it must.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Words and music by Maurice Sugar, attorney for the United Automobile Workers of America.

<sup>2</sup> Editorial in *United Rubber Worker*, May, 1936, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *The Nation*, December 5, 1936, p. 653.

<sup>4</sup> Russell B. Porter in *The New York Times*, February 7, 1937.

<sup>5</sup> Max Gazan in *The Flint Auto Worker*, January 12, 1937.

<sup>6</sup> *The United Automobile Worker*, January 22, 1937.

<sup>7</sup> From suppressed radio talk, published in *The United Automobile Worker*, January 22, 1937.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the refusal of an Illinois judge in 1933 to enjoin striking workers because the employer had paid unfair wages and maintained unreasonable working hours. The decision, based on the "unclean hands" theory, is reported in the *Monthly Labor Review*, November, 1933, p. 1133.

<sup>9</sup> *New York Post*, January 22, 1937.